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**Vietnamese Beauty: Exploring the Definition of Female Beauty
in Present Day, Urban Vietnam as seen through the Desire for
White Skin.**



Dorie Topolsky
World Learning, SIT Study Abroad
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Abstract:

Upon my arrival in Vietnam, I was exposed to Vietnamese women's desire for white skin. The beauty industry in Vietnam is heavily represented in everyday life through the women who do not go into the sunlight unless they are completely covered from head to toe and by the numerous skin care stores and advertisements on every block. I started my research on the skin whitening community in Vietnam with hopes of gaining an understanding of the motivations behind why Vietnamese women are willing to put so much effort into obtaining white skin and quickly realized that the development of the beauty industry in Vietnam is a representation of the progress that the country has made over the past two decades. Like every other aspect of Vietnamese society, the beauty industry is thriving, proving to be a testament to Vietnam's development, both as a society and as a people.

Introduction:

My study abroad in Vietnam marked my first time in Asia. Always one for observation, analysis, and appreciation of differences amongst cultures, I could not help but notice the disparities between what the Vietnamese women and I view as ‘beautiful’. Through my time in Vietnam, I found that similar to many other aspects of Vietnamese society today, the beauty industry is quickly developing as a result of the growth in the economy. For me, the question then became two fold: Did our understandings of ‘beautiful’ or what is desirable, lie in the difference between our cultures, and if so what was the impetus for the divergence between the two definitions? Or, are beauty ideals – such as skin whitening – just a construction of Vietnamese culture with the goal of building an industry that drives the economy? In a sense, what came first the chicken (beauty) or the egg (beautiful)?

From the very first week that I arrived in Vietnam, I was exposed to one very specific cultural beauty ideal, which is the desire of many Vietnamese women to have white skin. On my second day in Vietnam, I rode on the back of a motorbike for the first time. As the adrenaline of weaving through Ho Chi Minh City’s infamous traffic ran through my veins and sweat began to form at the base of my neck, the petite Vietnamese student who was driving the motorbike turned her head over her shoulder and told me how much she hates the sun. I leaned forward, making sure not disrupt the balance of the motorbike, and asked her why she hated the sun? She explained that when it is sunny and she rides her motorbike around the city, her skin becomes darker, unless she covers it. I

instinctively thought how bizarre that was since most fair skinned Americans welcome sunshine with open arms and actively seek opportunities to darken their skin.

Within the first few weeks of being in Vietnam, there were several more instances when young Vietnamese women initiated conversations with me about how much they disliked the sun because it darkened their skin. I soon noticed the ways that this beauty ideal was incorporated into the developing Vietnam as well. Once I became aware that having white skin is a physical attribute that many Vietnamese women desire, I could not help but notice the ways that this ideal is incorporated into many aspects of present day, urban Vietnamese society. Skin care commercials and advertisements, filled with images of fair skinned women, overpower the Vietnamese beauty industry, setting a precedent of how an ideal Vietnamese woman should look.

I originally set out to answer the following questions about the skin whitening culture in Vietnam: Why do so many Vietnamese women have such a great desire to have pale skin? How are young women in Vietnam taught that pale skin is ideal and a sure sign of beauty? When and where did the idea that pale skin is a valuable physical characteristic for a Vietnamese woman? What efforts does an average Vietnamese women put into obtaining pale skin? However, soon after the start of my research I realized that I had been approaching skin whitening in Vietnam as if it was a taboo or a sensitive subject, when in reality it is a widely common and accepted practice. This realization did not deter me from wanting to answer my initial questions, but rather motivated me to take a deeper look at the roots of the developing beauty industry in Vietnam. After a change in strategy, I began to treat my inquiry into the skin whitening community in Vietnam as a case study in hopes that I could convey a message that the

development of the beauty industry in Vietnam is a representation and a testament to the changing times and the changing social perception of Vietnamese beauty

Methodology:

Recognizing my Perspective:

There is a popular brand of all-purpose, hiking sandals in America called Chacos. Chacos sandals are not shoes that many people in America wear on a daily basis, unless that person leads an out-doors, physically active lifestyle, but in no way are Chaco sandals considered to be fashionable shoes. Chaco sandals are, however, often worn among Westerners tourists when they travel on vacation to other parts of the world because they are shoes that are very sturdy, give great support and are light on the feet when traveling to a very hot climate. Within the first month of being in Vietnam, I noticed that many Vietnamese students, both boys and girls, were wearing a sandal that looked almost identical to the style of Chaco sandals that many Western travelers wear. I also began to notice the same type of shoe being sold in street markets throughout Vietnam, markets that were targeted towards locals. I found it slightly comical that Chaco inspired shoes were so popular in Vietnam and worn on a daily basis by many Vietnamese students because that is rarely seen in America. I could not help but wonder how and why this Western style of shoe became so popular in Vietnam? After a few weeks of hypothesizing, I came to the conclusion that this style of sandal *must* have become popular because Vietnamese people saw so many Western tourists wearing Chaco sandals and therefore if they saw tourists wearing them, then they must have thought they were fashionable, right?

During one of my interviews with a University student in Hanoi, I had the opportunity to ask her why that particular style of sandals is so popular among Vietnamese students. She seemed confused by my question and so I explained that they look very similar to a sandal that many Americans wear when they go hiking, or traveling or will be out doors, but that I was unsure as to how they become popular in Vietnam. Then she explained that students are not allowed to wear flip flops to school and wearing sneakers can make a person very hot considering that Vietnam experiences tropical weather. Therefore, this type of sandal with straps, ensuring that the shoes does not fall off the foot, is a perfect balance between a flip-flop and a sneaker; they allow for air flow, keeping the individual cool, and are still allowed in school. In that moment I realized how simple the explanation was and how naive I had been for thinking the whole time that the western tourists had had this HUGE influence on these young Vietnamese students.

The reason why I mention this story is because I now realize that I had the same thought when I was first exposed to the common desire among Vietnamese women to have white skin; I initially assumed that Vietnamese women want white skin so that they would look more western, more modern and therefore more beautiful. As an American student majoring in Anthropology, I have been taught to recognize the position that I hold relative to the culture I will be entering. In the weeks prior to my departure to Vietnam, I made a conscious effort to mentally prepared myself for immersion into a culture that I could only imagine was very different from my own. While I believe that I did a good job of preparing myself to be open minded, I believe that I faltered in recognizing how I viewed myself as a Westerner entering a developing country:

...Those who live and think in the West are not aware of how much impact they have on the rest of the world, or what the Rests thinks of the West. The Western mind believes that it understands all worlds, since it is open to all ideas and closed to none. The paradoxical result of this deep-seated assumption is that the Western mind is actually unaware of the limits of its understanding and comprehension (Mahbubani, 47).

I believe that through my own travels and education I have become very aware of the “impact that [the West has] on the rest of the world”, to the point that for the first few weeks of my time in Vietnam I was blinded by my own assumption that many Vietnamese women put effort into their appearance in hopes of being perceived as “modern” or “Western” because I thought I *was* aware of the impact that the West has on the Rest. Without realizing it, I believe that the superiority complex associated with the West flooded my mind, to the point that I was consumed with the fact that I was aware of the West’s impact on the rest of the world, and in turn hindered my ability to see developing Vietnamese society for what it is, rather than what I assumed it to be. Considering that Vietnam is a developing country, there is definitely a certain appeal to looking “western” or “modern” but I found that the reasons why so many Vietnamese women desire white skin and put so much effort into achieving it has little to do with trying to pass as Western, and more to do with embracing the development of the beauty industry in Vietnam.

Observation:

Once I realized that I had an assumed bias as a westerner, I made a conscious effort to not jump to conclusions but rather take in my surroundings as a self-declared outsider who is trying to see the Vietnamese beauty industry with clear eyes. In order to truly understand a culture, one must actively make an effort to understand it as its native

members do. The first step in learning about a culture is to experience it, to simply be in the same location as the subject is not enough; one must be willing to immerse both their body and mind into the new surroundings. As described by Harry Wolcott in *The Art of Fieldwork*, there is a between simply being in the field and actually doing fieldwork:

...The essence of fieldwork is revealed in the intent behind it, rather than by the label itself...fieldwork is a form of inquiry in which one is immersed personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or group for the purposes of research. Fieldwork is characterized by personal involvement to achieve some level of understanding that will be shared with others...Fieldwork in its narrow sense must become part of something more, something that catapults it beyond the range of personal experience, beyond simply 'being there' (Wolcott, 66).

A large portion of my research was done through the conscious act of observation. Ever since I was exposed to the concept that Vietnamese women actively try to keep their skin as light as possible, I was actively aware of my surroundings and observing how society projected the ideal of having pale skin into a Vietnamese woman's everyday life. When using observation as a technique in my research, I made sure to absorb all aspects of the actors, places and activities that I thought would help me to better understand how Vietnamese women are taught what is considered to be beautiful; I had intent.

Questionnaire:

While observation served to be a very useful tool in understanding how Vietnamese women's desire to have white skin is incorporated into their everyday life, I also recognized that observation can lead to incorrect assumptions and observations, even when trying to stay as un-biased as possible. While I had casually talked to several Vietnamese women about their thoughts on having pale skin and it was clear that it was a physical characteristic that they aspired to have, I wanted to reach a wider audience of

Vietnamese women through a questionnaire that allowed *them* tell to *me* what they think is the most important physical attribute(s) in defining a beautiful Vietnamese woman.

This being said, I recognize that when handing out a questionnaire, there is still the possibility of error or misinterpretation, especially when the questions are written in English and English is the recipient's second language. It was also brought to my attention that there is always the possibility of the recipient answering a question as they think they *should* answer it: "Part of the art of fieldwork lies in being attentive to and able to acquire ordinary everyday information, rather than letting our assumptions fill in the gaps or using a questionnaire as likely to elicit socially correct responses as honest ones" (Wolcott 81). By handing out a questionnaire, I realize that I ran the risk of the beneficiary substituting honest answers with "socially correct responses" and therefore had to take this into consideration when analyzing the results of my questionnaire.

My questionnaire was distributed to female English language, American studies university students in Hanoi. Given that the recipients were second year students, they were between the 18 to 22 years old. I decided to only give the questionnaires to female students because while I think that it is important to understand if and how men's opinion of Vietnamese beauty influences women's concept of what is considered beautiful, there were only several male students in the class and ultimately I was more interested in hearing the thoughts of women who are directly subjected to the beauty ideals of Vietnam.

Interview:

The final method used in my research was interviews. Focused observation gave me a solid understanding of how beauty has been epitomized throughout Vietnamese society. Distributing questionnaires to a group of female, university students gave me greater insight into which physical attributes a selection of young Vietnamese adults value most. However, both of these methods require me to come to my own conclusions about the meaning and motivation behind what I observed or was told. By talking to a Vietnamese woman in person, I was given invaluable insight into the way that a Vietnamese woman understands beauty. Given the time restraints of this project and therefore a lack of time to conduct proper networking, the amount of interviews that I was able to complete was limited. However, I am a strong believer in quality over quantity. As Harry Wolcott stated:

Many years ago I got to thinking about the crossover point in fieldwork when I felt I knew enough about even one individual – let alone an entire ‘people’ such as the Kwakiutl – in sufficient depth that I could write with confidence because I felt I knew what I was talking about, beyond the relatively safe practice of quoting ‘informants’ (or, reflecting current efforts to be more collaborative, ‘participants’) (Wolcott, 78).

To know and truly understand one or a few individuals with great depth can be more meaningful and helpful to one’s understanding of a cultural concept than talking briefly with a larger number of members from the relative community. To truly know and understand one individual can provide great insight and therefore can be used to better understand a general perception of a people when dealing with very limited amount of time to conduct research; knowing one individual is a gift, let alone an entire people.

Findings:

Through both observation and reviewing answers from the questionnaire, it became clear that there are three main methods that Vietnamese women use to keep their skin white. The second section of my questionnaire was specifically focused on questions about skin. When asked, “What methods do Vietnamese women use to keep their skin white?” the following methods were listed as an answer in almost every single one of the 10 questionnaires I received back. The first method stated was to avoid going outside when during the hottest time of day (one girl reported anywhere between 10:00 am and 3:30 pm) because that is when the sun is the strongest. If you must go outside during this time of day, the best way to ensure that your skin stays white is to wear some sort of protective clothing or cover from the sun. Normal, everyday clothing usually covers a woman’s torso and thighs. However, depending on the type of shirt or blouse she is wearing, different amounts of a woman’s arms may be exposed and likewise, depending on if a woman is wearing shorts, pants, a skirt or a dress, different amounts of her legs may be exposed to the sun. If a woman’s shirt does not cover the full length of her arms, many women will wear long sleeved gloves to cover the exposed arm. If a woman’s arms are covered but she is worried that while riding around the city on her motorbike, her hands will darken as they rest on the handle bars, she may choose to wear gloves that only reach the wrist.

Many Vietnamese women also tend to wear facemasks that have a dual purpose, to prevent the breathing in of pollution from the heavy Ho Chi Minh City traffic, as well as protecting the face from sun damage. The most commonly used facemasks are made of cotton and spread from one ear to the other ear, held on with elastic hooks that wrap around each ear. If a woman wants to ensure that her neck stays covered from the sun as well, some masks have a bib-like component that reaches all the way down to the woman's clavicle bone. In Hanoi I noticed that many women wore a smock-like top while on their motorbikes. Traditionally, a smock is a looser piece of clothing worn over clothing to protect the under clothing from getting dirty, but in this case the smock is made to protect areas of exposed skin from the sun. These smocks feature a hood, a built in collar that can be wrapped around the face and therefore used as a mask, and long sleeves that extended over a woman's hand to prevent her skin from getting tan while riding the motorbike through the sunny streets of Hanoi.

If a woman is wearing shorts, a skirt or a dress and is concerned that the skin on her legs will darken from exposure to the sun, a lot of Vietnamese women wear transparent, nude color tights that still give the illusion of having nude legs, when in reality there is a thin layer of sheer cloth covering her bare skin. Similar to the hand gloves previously described, if a woman's legs are covered but her feet are not, she can purchase sheer, nude colored socks to wear with her shoes. Many women decide to wear toe socks so that they still have the option of being comfortable and continue to wear flip-flop sandals without worrying about their feet getting tan. I also observed that wearing a sun hat, either alone or underneath a motorbike helmet, is also a very common method of keeping sunlight off of the face and neck. Lastly, on a particularly sunny day, it is not

uncommon to see Vietnamese women parading down the street with an umbrella in hand or, when times get desperate, holding a newspaper or magazine over their heads if they are not properly equipped with proper cover up from the sun.

A second method that Vietnamese women use to keep their skin white is using skin-whitening creams. When I entered the cosmetic section of any department store or local supermarket, I am instantly drawn towards the bright, florescent lights and large Pond's or Nivea ads for the newest skin whitening cream or deodorant. When I met with the general manager of Nivea in Ho Chi Minh City, Tran Thi Lan Anh, she told me that Nivea's Vietnamese consumers are big fans of the night cream because of the weather in Vietnam. It is so hot and sticky during the day, therefore it is not comfortable or convenient for Vietnamese women to put on lotion during the day (such as sunscreen or skin whitening products). However, she said that at night, when it is cooler and women are more likely to be indoors with a fan or air conditioning, it is more comfortable and convenient for them to use a whitening cream, hence why the night cream is very popular in Vietnam. Being that I have never used whitening cream, I was unsure as to how it worked. Lan Anh explained to me that melanin in skin becomes darker when exposed to sunlight. Whitening products reduce how much melanin is produced in the top 2 layers of the skin, therefore lessening the effects of the sun on the skin when exposed to sunlight. Because whitening creams do not work instantly but rather requires time and therefore can be used at any time, Lan Anh told me that about 80% of Vietnamese women prefer to use night time whitening creams.

Although advertisements for whitening creams and images of women with very pale skin dominate commercials, beauty ads in magazines and billboards, when asked,

“What do you think of skin whitening products?” they all said that skin whitening products are very useful and important for protecting the skin from the sun. However, one recipient responded by saying, “Skin whitening products help the skin’s white but it isn’t good for skin” and another recipient responded by saying, “I am now still considering how it works. I am afraid of spending stupid money on them”. So while I learned from Lan Anh at Nivea that skin whitening products are very popular in Vietnam, it seems that among university students, there is still some hesitation to use whitening creams because of the unknown, damaging side effects that it might have on a woman’s skin, as well as the high prices that it would cost to sustain the use of whitening creams.

The third method that the recipients of the questionnaire listed as a way for a Vietnamese woman to keep her skin white is by going to a beauty salon. As I walked through the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, I could not walk more than 3 blocks without seeing some sort of beauty store, whether it be a skin care store, a cosmetics store or a hair salon. If you refer to Appendix 1, you will see that I asked the recipients to rate each aspect of beauty by its level of importance. The three highest rated physical characteristics, in no particular order, were hair, fair skin and facial structure. In question 4 when asked, “In your opinion, from the categories listed above, which physical characteristic is MOST important for a Vietnamese woman to have to be considered beautiful? Why?” the majority of the responses reported hair as being the most important. While one recipient answered that facial structure was the most important because a woman “can’t change [her] facial structure (except for plastic surgery). For the first 5 aspects, normally they can be changed by style”, the reason that the majority of the recipients gave for thinking hair was the most important characteristic is because a

woman is able to alter her hair and therefore she can “show her character” and “influence her beauty”.

When I was doing research in Hanoi, I had the opportunity to talk with a 20 year old Vietnamese girl named C.A., which is the nickname she gives to foreigners because they can never pronounce her Vietnamese name properly. While we sat on small stools on the paved sidewalk, drinking ice tea and eating a package of sweetened sunflower seeds, she shared with me that hair is becoming a new way to define beauty in Vietnam because it is a way to show your identity. For example, long hair is considered feminine and sexy whereas short hair considered stylish and on the cutting edge of fashion. She also explained to me that everywhere she looks she sees girls who look exactly the same because the idea of ‘beauty’ has become generalized in Vietnamese society. At one time, having noticeably white skin was probably hard to come by, so when a girl did have very white skin, she stood out for that. However, with the development of the beauty industry and new skin whitening products and methods coming out every month, having white skin is easier to achieve. C.A. says that today she looks at one girl and although she may think that she looks very cute, her makeup is done well and has a nice outfit on, the minute she turns away she immediately forgets what that girl looks like because her ‘beauty’ is a the generic beauty that most Vietnamese women are trying to achieve. The fact that hair is becoming equally as important in contributing to the beauty of a Vietnamese woman as the color of her skin proves that the idea of beauty in Vietnam is evolving past the traditions and beauty standards that once were.

Vietnamese Perception of Beauty:

Traditional Influences:

Vietnam's history is as rich as it is long. With over ten centuries of Chinese rule, it is inevitable that aspects of Vietnamese culture and tradition were greatly influenced by prominent components of Chinese culture, such as Confucianism. One of the greatest ways that Confucian principles has continued to be incorporated into Vietnamese culture can be seen through the expectations that are placed onto Vietnamese women, specifically in the realm of a family. According to traditional Confucian thought, women are taught to be dependent, and therefore become inferior to men. This dependency on men is demonstrated throughout a woman's life as she is passed from one man to another: "According to the Confucian moral code of the 'three obediences', a woman must show obedience to father before marriage, to husband when married and to the eldest son when widowed" (Schuler 386). In each of the three stages of obedience a women is presented with the opportunity to prove her skills in dependence, reliance and obedience.

In addition to the 'three obediences', Vietnamese women are also subject to the four virtues of Confucian philosophy, which consists of domestic work, dignified appearance, gentle words and chastity (Hoa Sen Univeristy Lecture). In terms of domestic work, women are held responsible for the well being of their household, including daily chores as well as the happiness of the household. Women are expected to put the needs of their family, mainly the men in the family, before her own: "Women are expected to work diligently to better themselves and their families, and to always put the family's (and often the nation's) interests ahead of their own. In identifying themselves

so closely with their families, women often feel personally responsible when the family fails to live up to social and cultural norms” (Schuler, 385). In order to ensure that a family lives up to “social and cultural norms”, a woman must do her part in properly representing her family by up holding a dignified appearance. To maintain a dignified appearance, a woman must be virtuous, and in order to be virtuous a woman must *not* be talented. There is a popular Vietnamese proverb that says, “Virtue is much better than beauty” (*Cai Net Danh Chet Cai Dep*) for if a woman is without virtue, it is because her virtue is being killed by her preoccupation with striving to be obtain beauty. If a woman is beautiful and not virtuous, her virtue is being killed by beauty. A dignified appearance is supposed to come from inside a woman and therefore she must be mindful of how her actions and words reflect onto the men in her life. If a Vietnamese woman devotes too much time to her physical appearance, she runs the risk of attracting glances from men (other than her husband), therefore projecting an immoral image of herself onto society and possibly causing conflict in the relationship between husband and wife. Vietnamese women have therefore been taught to refrain from incorporating any external sign of beauty that might give her family a bad reputation or deter her from her main purpose; to serve her family.

The Influence of Economic Growth on Women:

Within the past 15 years, Vietnam has seen experience great economic growth. With such a extreme increase in the country’s yearly GDP, the living conditions and quality of life has drastically improved:

In the 1990’s, the Vietnamese economy grew at an average annual rate of 7.5 percent. This was achieved despite the impact of the Asian economic crisis

toward the end of this decade. As a result, despite an 18 percent population growth in the 1990's, the Vietnamese GDP per capita increased from U.S. \$144 in 1990 to U.S. \$397 in 2000 and U.S. \$414 in 2001. According to the World Bank analysis of two living standard survey data sets in Vietnam, the poverty rate declined from 58 percent in 1992-1993 to 37 percent in 1997-1998. These achievements are impressive in many respects. On one level, they were facilitated by the political stability and economic renovation policy (*doi moi*) adopted at the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist party in 1986 (Hy Van Luong, 1)

With such a extreme drop in the poverty level after the establishment of the *Doi Moi* policy in 1986, the end of trade embargo against Vietnam in 1994 and the normalization of relation between the United States and Vietnam in 1995, Vietnamese women have taken full advantage of the new economic opportunities (Fulbright Lecture). Although Vietnamese women are taught to be dependent on men throughout their lifetime and in turn have fallen into a position of inferiority, they are still responsible for contributing to the finances of their family: "The attributes of gender relation in the Vietnamese family are somewhat different of that of the family in other countries in the region. In Vietnam, women in the family not only take the roles of wives and mothers, but also the role of economic – finance managers – who keep the keys of the trunks in their family" ("Gender Issues in Vietnam at Present). Traditionally Vietnamese women are taught to be obedient to the men in their life and ensure the happiness of the home before their own personal happiness, however, they are also expected to contribute to the well being of the home and therefore are given leeway to pursue a career in hopes of bettering the quality of life of the family. As Vietnam's economy has taken a turn for the better, the quality of life has drastically improved with a more stable market and opportunities for women to establish a more independent lifestyle; a lifestyle that offers more flexibility among what is required of a woman.

With the fast growing economy of Vietnam, Vietnamese women recognized the potential they had to make a name for themselves in the rapidly developing society and therefore seized the opportunity to transform their traditional role as the family's caregiver into a new, self-established position of influence: "...Today's Vietnamese women excel in educational and scientific activities. Furthermore, they play an important role in the development of the household economy, and this has led to changes in their functions as daughters, wives or mothers" (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 28). As Vietnamese society has changed with the developing times, so has the role of women and their "functions as daughters, wives or mother", along with the concept of beauty.

Conclusion:

When I first arrived in Vietnam 3 and ½ months ago, I had no idea what I was going to research for my independent study project. However, I was fortunate that within my first week in Vietnam I unintentionally stumbled upon a topic that I now realize encompassed one of the greatest things about Vietnamese society today, the intertwining of tradition and modernity. I will admit that when I was first introduced to the skin whitening culture in Vietnam, I was quick to judge. I assumed that Vietnamese women were trying to look “Western” or “Modern” and that they were trading in their natural beauty for a fake, conventional look. It seemed eccentric that Vietnamese women would cover every part of their body whenever they went outside during the day as to avoid all risk of their skin getting darker from sun exposure. When I read Vietnamese magazines or watched TV, the overwhelming number of skincare advertisements and ads astonished me. Every woman that I saw pictured on a billboard or skin care campaign as I explored Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi had flawlessly white skin; everywhere I looked I saw models of idealized beauty being represented throughout urban settings in Vietnam.

I started my independent study projects with the hopes of getting to the bottom of why so many Vietnamese women feel the need to put so much effort into keeping their skin as pale as possible. However, through focused observation it quickly became easy for me to prove that having white skin is a common desire among Vietnamese women, the signs were everywhere and therefore I quickly accepted that the Vietnamese women’s desire to have white skin was a social norm. Being that I am an anthropology major, I have been taught to try and understand the topics that I am studying as if I was an “insider” or at least to take into consideration the culture and environment that someone

grows up in. This being said, I started to think that if I had grown up in Vietnam, I would probably think that having white skin is a sign of beauty, just like how growing up in America I think that having tan skin is a desirable physical attribute. Things to consider:

1. Genetically, the *skin* of Vietnamese women *darkens* very quickly when exposed to the sun.
2. Vietnam is a tropical country and therefore has 2 tropical seasons: Hot season and *very* Hot season, both of which have lots of *sun*.
3. The main mode of transportation is *motorbike*, which offers *no* shield from the sun (unlike a car)

Considering the facts and the lifestyle that Vietnamese people live, there are some simple but important factors that think about given the lifestyle: **IF** a Vietnamese women prefers that she has white skin and **IF** it is a fact that her skin darkens very quickly with the exposure to sunlight and **IF** it is sunny most of the year in Vietnam and **IF** the only mode of transportation is motorbike, which exposes the skin to the sun then **WHAT** is a girl to do to keep her skin white but to cover up? I decided to accept the fact that having white skin is a preferred beauty trait in Vietnam and has been for many, many years.

Therefore, given the circumstance of everyday life, if a Vietnamese girl is living in an urban setting and wants to maintain their pale skin, then things such as not going outside during the middle of the day, or covering your skin when riding on your motorbike are the measures that she is going to take; it may seems absurd but it is just something that is matter of fact given the circumstances.

While at one time, there may have been deeper motives to wanting pale skin, in modern time, girls are growing up surrounded by images in magazines, billboards and on T.V or film of famous actresses and models who all have white skin. All that these young Vietnamese girls learn about beauty is that white skin is preferable. There is speculation

that at one time having white skin was a representation of a woman's status. If a woman had white skin then it would be assumed that she was not a laborer because if she was a farmer, for example, then her skin would undoubtedly be dark and tanned from working outside, under the sun all day. As the C.A, the 20 year old Vietnamese woman who I interviewed in Hanoi said, "White skin means uptown, therefore dark skin means downtown". Whereas the older generation of Vietnamese women may have alternative motives for desiring white skin, the new generation of Vietnamese girl are simply growing up in a society that portrays an ideal Vietnamese women as having white skin. If all of the famous Vietnamese women have obviously pale skin, and if all of the ads in magazines and commercials on T.V are about skin products, the idea the white skin is preferred is embedded into minds of young Vietnamese girls. With the fast changing economy and growing development of urban settings, beauty is becoming a huge industry and a way for women to show independence and that they are adapting to modern times.

With the rise of the economy, living conditions have improved significantly and women finally have the means to devote time to *themselves*. Fifteen years ago there was no such thing as a beauty industry in Vietnam because society was too busy struggling to survive and put food on the table. However, with the rapid growth in the economy has come the development an entire industry devoted to beauty. Fifteen years ago women had not knowledge of how to take care of their skin or what products were available to them. However, a lot has changed and a substantial beauty industry is emerging in Vietnam, which is proving to be a true testament to Vietnam's progress and where the country are heading in the future. When a society is able to put time and money into a beauty industry, something that can be thought of as luxury in life, it shows that they

have consumers who are able and ready to participate in the market and are not longer just trying to survive because the Vietnamese people are starting to thrive financially.

With the development of the beauty industry, has come a new sense of female empowerment. Traditionally, women were only meant to take care of husband and children and prepare meals and clean the house, which left little time to think or care about her own well being. However, within the past 15 years, with the development of Vietnam, the mentality and thinking towards women and beauty has, and is continuing to change. Women are beginning to become more financially independent and therefore have a say in how they spend their time and money. Yes, a woman is still primarily responsible for raising the children and taking care of the household, but in addition to that it is becoming more and more acceptable for them to also think about themselves and spend time on their beauty, turning beauty into a as a source of empowerment for Vietnamese women. Throughout history, Vietnamese women have had to suppress the desire feel good about how they look because they had been taught that if they put too much effort into their outward appearance, they ran the risk of killing their virtue. However, every woman likes to feel beautiful and if she thinks that she looks beautiful, she will feel better about herself and therefore have more confidence in herself.

Thinking back to the quote, “Virtue is much better than beauty”, it was once thought that a woman cannot have both virtue and beauty, and therefore women were taught only focus on her responsibilities and her role as a caregiver. However, the mentality towards beauty has changed in the last two decades, encouraging the idea that a woman *can* have both beauty and virtue, so long as they do not let either side tip the scale; a woman must learn to balance both beauty and virtue. Vietnam is in a great time

of transition, it is almost as if the country is trying catch up to the rest of the developed world and the fact the beauty industry is thriving is proof that Vietnam is in a crucial stage in its development process. The future is unknown, only time will tell what the future of Vietnam will look like, so for now I would like to end with a question and a quote which I think help to bring my independent study project full circle, back to the idea that first sparked my interest:

When humans visualize a body, they see mostly skin. The skin is the body's direct interface with the physical environment, conveying a state of health and personal identity... This skin also provides a forum for advertising. It provides information about a person's age, health, and some aspect of ancestry, and furnishes a placard upon which further information is placed through temporary and permanent decoration (Jablonski, 585).

Is Vietnamese Beauty Skin Deep?

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Appendix:

Vietnamese Beauty: Exploring the Definition of Female Beauty in Present Day, Urban Vietnam as shown through the Desire for Pale Skin.

My name is Dorie Topolsky and I am an American student with the Student in International Training (SIT) study abroad program (<http://www.sit.edu/studyabroad/>). The title of our program is Vietnam: Culture, Development and Social Change, therefore for the past 2 ½ months me and 11 other American students have been traveling around Vietnam, trying to learn as much about Vietnamese culture as possible! For the last month of our program, each student is required to do an independent research project.

From the very first week that I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, I was exposed to the desire of Vietnamese women to maintain their naturally pale skin. As I rode on the back of a motorbike for the first time, the Vietnamese student driving the motorbike told me that she hated the sun because it meant that when she rode her motorbike around the city her skin would become darker, unless she covered up. I have noticed that there is a common belief among many Vietnamese women that the more white a woman's skin, the more beautiful she is. For my independent research project, I have chosen to study why Vietnamese women have such a great desire to have white skin, why they think it is beautiful and what methods they use to keep their skin white.

Below are some general questions for you to answer about what is considered beautiful for a Vietnamese woman. There are no right or wrong answers; I am just looking to gain a better understanding of Vietnamese beauty. Your answers can be as short or long as you like, I really appreciate any information you are willing to share with me! Thanks!

1. What is your name and age?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Please rate each aspect of beauty from **1- 10** in order of its importance to a woman's beauty (**1** being the least important to a woman's beauty and **10** being the most important to a woman's beauty).

- Height: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- Hair: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- Fair Skin: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- Quality of Skin: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- Weight: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- Facial Structure: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. In your opinion, from the categories listed above, which physical characteristic is MOST important for a Vietnamese woman to have to be considered beautiful? Why?

5. Do you strive to obtain characteristics that you think makes a woman beautiful? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

6. How do you see other Vietnamese women trying to obtain beauty?

7. What role do you think images (Ads, commercials, movies etc) play in influencing what young Vietnamese woman think is beautiful?

8. Can you think of any myths or legends that portray a beautiful woman? Can you describe what she looks like?

SKIN:

1. What methods do Vietnamese women use to keep their skin white?

2. What do you think of skin whitening products?

3. Do health risks motivate women to cover up from the sun? (For example, to protect from getting skin cancer from the sun)

4. Comments: Feel free to share any other thoughts with me! If you have any questions that you would like to ask me about my research or anything else that you would like to share with me, either over email or in person, you can reach me at:
dorietopolsky@gmail.com.

